Student satisfaction in higher education: settling up and settling down

Claire Skea

To cite this article: Claire Skea (2017) Student satisfaction in higher education: settling up and settling down, Ethics and Education, 12:3, 364-377, DOI: 10.1080/17449642.2017.1343560

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2017.1343560

Published online: 26 Jun 2017.

Article views: 105

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Student satisfaction in higher education: settling up and settling down

Claire Skea

Institute of Childhood and Education, Leeds Trinity University, Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT
Student satisfaction measures serve to provide a measure of ‘quality’ in the current audit culture of universities. This paper argues that the form of satisfaction valued within contemporary Higher Education amounts to a form of settling, where the primary aim is to settle the students’ expectations, and meet their needs. Drawing initially on the etymology of ‘satisfaction’, the paper then turns to the work of Martin Heidegger and his notion of the ‘uncanny’ (das Unheimliche), to discuss how we are ontologically unsettled. The uncanny will be discussed in relation to the Greek play Antigone, and illustrated with examples from the novel Stoner. In provoking angst or anxiety by leaving students ‘unsettled’ in terms of their thinking, this may open students up to a consideration of more ontological concerns – within their Higher Education but also in their lives more generally.

Customer satisfaction in education

Universities commonly use questionnaires to assess student satisfaction levels (Yorke 2009). The most widely used measure of student satisfaction in the UK is the National Student Survey (NSS), introduced in 2005 by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE), and conducted by Ipsos MORI. The NSS is given to all final-year undergraduates and consists of 27 questions with Likert-type responses ranging from ‘definitely agree’ to ‘definitely disagree’. There is just one question to assess students’ overall satisfaction. Higher education institutions are judged by the number of their students who complete the NSS, as well as whether the student feedback is positive or negative. Results from the NSS exert a large influence on institutional reputation, with good results being utilised for marketing purposes and as a public relations exercise (Bowden 2000; Sabri 2011).

Arguably, the main function of national student satisfaction measures is to provide prospective students with information to assist with their university choices (Canning 2015). However, it is also used as a form of accountability (Williams and

KEYWORDS
Student satisfaction; settling; unsettling; Heidegger; the uncanny

CONTACT
Claire Skea c.skea@leedstrinity.ac.uk

© 2017 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
Cappuccini-Ansfield (2007) through institutional measures such as course and module evaluations. I am not going to argue here that certain aspects of student satisfaction are not important, but this paper will critique the dominance of such measures within the contemporary HE sector. Student satisfaction should not be privileged over and above other aims of Higher Education.

The current literature resists any clear-cut definition of ‘student satisfaction’ (Garcia-Aracil 2009); instead its meaning seems to be taken as a given. Through the increasing marketisation of HE provision, students are repositioned either as ‘customers’ (Scott 1999; Bay and Daniel 2001; Mark 2013), ‘consumers’ (Blackmore 2009; Gruber et al. 2010), ‘partners’ (Bay and Daniel 2001; Clayson and Haley 2005), or even ‘products’ (Guolla 1999; Clayson and Haley 2005); with academics being considered as mere ‘service providers’ (Vuori 2013). Student satisfaction, understood as a proxy measure of teaching quality, is the summary evaluation of a student’s HE experience, it is the result of a comparison between one’s expectations and perceptions (Gruber et al. 2010; Sarrico and Rosa 2014). The ‘gap’ model explains that if one’s perceptions of their Higher Education exceed their expectations, then this results in satisfaction; if one’s expectations are not met, this can lead instead to dissatisfaction (Barnes 2007). If Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are aiming to satisfy their students, then meeting their expectations and giving them what they want is central to this. As Blackmore (2009, 860) puts it, ‘the market-driven approach assumes and encourages the view that students (and employers) know what they want and they have a right to get it – whether it be in content, assessment or contact hours’. With students being considered more as ‘customers’ that need to be satisfied, a sense of ‘academic entitlement’ (Sarrico and Rosa 2014) has crept into HE. A shift in student attitudes has been identified, whereby students believe that paying for a degree confers the right to obtain one, regardless of the amount of effort expended on their part (Rolfe 2002).

Repositioning students as ‘customers’, ‘consumers’, or ‘products’ implies a certain level of passivity on their part, so efforts have been made recently to consider students instead as ‘partners’ in the educational process. Clayson and Haley highlight the tensions inherent in this debate as follows:

Viewing students as customers is consistent with the zeitgeist in which business models have been more widely accepted due to the success of marketing methods … once this mindset was developed, the logical question to ask of opponents was, ‘If the idea that students are customers is unacceptable, what then are they?’ To some, if students are not customers, then they must be products. (Clayson and Haley 2005, 2)

Whichever term denotes the identity of students in the contemporary university, it is clear that they are no longer considered as ‘students’ in pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself. The aim of the game is to satisfy students, and the relative success of this endeavour is reflected in student survey responses and employability statistics six months after graduation. Higher Education is increasingly seen as a private commodity, with knowledge that can be bought and sold like any other product or service. Comparisons between the HE sector and other service industries are
seemingly unavoidable, as one student put it ‘in a grocery store, you have to be as nice as possible towards the customer, but it is not like that here’ (Vuori 2013, 183).

Clearly, there is a price tag placed on HE which cannot be ignored, and thus the repositioning of students in consumerist terms is an effect of this; what I take issue with in this paper is that the purpose of a Higher Education is being reduced to merely economic concerns. In the drive to create ‘pleasurable and measurable experiences’ (Gibbs 2015, 64) within HE, are we in fact driving away from that which could be considered most important? Whilst it seems appropriate for students to be satisfied with their Higher Education in certain respects – such as catering, library facilities, and accommodation – the danger here is that the ‘purchasing’ of a Higher Education may be compared with that of buying the weekly shop in a supermarket. What this paper questions is whether customer satisfaction with the purchasing of goods and services, can be equated with a student’s satisfaction with their Higher Education. Can ‘satisfaction’ with learning and teaching be evaluated in the same way as traditionally considered ‘customer’ satisfaction?

Neoliberal rhetoric is so deeply ingrained within the HE sector now that possibilities for resistance appear to be limited, but criticisms have been levelled at the ‘student satisfaction’ agenda, and I will turn to these arguments later in the paper. In this next section, I will be looking at the etymology of ‘satisfaction’ to argue that the term implies both settling up, and settling down – these forms of settlement have ramifications for how the purpose of a Higher Education is reframed within marketised terms.

**Satisfaction: settling up and settling down**

The etymology of ‘satisfaction’ (from the Latin *satisfactionem*, to satisfy a creditor, or discharge a debt) suggests that it can be understood in terms of a kind of settlement of the account. ‘Settlement’ has also been used in a legal sense, when cases are drawn to a close, and this involves the payment of an account, such as the ‘settling of arrangements’ in a divorce. The etymology of ‘satisfaction’ shows that this is linked to the ‘settling up’ of a financial transaction; the current literature clearly establishes this (Bay and Daniel 2001; Rolfe 2002; Naidoo and Jamieson 2005). ‘Satisfaction’ could thus be considered as a form of ‘settling up’, as when we ‘settle up’ the bill in a restaurant. Upon leaving Higher Education, the students’ debts will be settled up once they obtain a graduate job. This is the exchange value of a degree: obtaining a degree typically involves the development of transferable employability skills (which they have paid substantial tuition fees for), and then entering graduate employment is a return on their investment through increased earnings.

Transactions are arguably involved throughout the everyday running of universities, but the recent championing of employability has become for many universities, the primary outcome of a Higher Education, and could be considered as the ‘gold standard’ of such transactions. Higher Education is increasingly considered in terms of inputs and outputs, with students as the inputs, and employable
graduates as the outputs. With the value of a degree being reduced to its exchange value in the labour market, it seems that ‘students seek to “have a degree” rather than “be learners’” (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009, 277). Employability could be considered as the ultimate ‘settling up’, and endpoint, of the financial transaction that is one’s Higher Education.

Student ‘satisfaction’ could also be considered as a form of settling down. Initially in the 1620s, the term ‘settlement’ was used in reference to the colonisation of land, and setting up a new territory; this is akin to an idea of settling down – of making home. Talk of ‘early settlers’ relates back to the surge in emigration to North America in the early 1600s, these people ventured to new lands and made it their own. But this settlement into a new territory also involved an unsettling from their previous home; the connection between satisfaction/settlement and being unsettled will be explored later in the paper.

The etymology of ‘satisfaction’ is also linked to a sense of ‘appeasement’ or ‘contentment’. Contentment in relation to student satisfaction could be considered as the meeting of student needs and/or expectations. Aiming to satisfy students involves a form of settling down, as universities become strongly and narrowly focused on meeting student expectations. In aiming to satisfy students, the focus is on meeting their expectations, giving them what they want, and making sure they are content – overall, we are aiming to provide ‘value for money’ (Rolfe 2002, 178) and to settle them down.

Meeting student need seems like a laudable objective; however, the concern is that the mantra of the market that ‘the customer is always right’ is inappropriate and ill-fitting for the Higher Education sector (Mark 2013). The dominance of student satisfaction measures in the contemporary university assumes that students know what they want, are able to assess their experience accurately, and that they should get what they want/expect from a Higher Education (Blackmore 2009). This is not to give an entirely negative account of settling down. Of course, in some contexts, settling down is just what is needed (think of a child who has grazed her knee and needs to be comforted, and settled); it is rather to question forms of settling down and contentment in Higher Education.

From looking at the etymology of both satisfaction and settlement, it seems clear that these terms could relate both to a form of settling up (an idea which directly relates to forms of economic exchange), as well as settling down (making everything comfortable and homely). Both settling up and settling down are concepts steeped in market economics. If student ‘satisfaction’ can be seen in these terms, that is, inextricably tied to the language of economic rationality, then it too denotes forms of settling up, and down.

**Philosophical ideas about student satisfaction**

Criticisms of student satisfaction and the marketisation of Higher Education are increasingly raised by philosophers of education, and it is to these concerns that
I will now turn. Ronald Barnett has proposed that contrary to aiming for student satisfaction, what is needed is in fact, ‘strangeness’. As he posits, ‘it is the university’s direct responsibility to bring students to confront accounts of the world that are new to those students. It is the university’s implicit responsibility, therefore, to disturb the students with strangeness’ (Barnett 2011, 124). The importance of disruption and strangeness discussed here can be seen in contrast to the current focus on meeting students’ needs and settling them down.

Staddon and Standish (2012) are also critical of the student satisfaction agenda within Higher Education, in particular its concurrent focus on providing an excellent ‘student experience’, as if the student experience were clearly delineated and defined. As they argue, ‘a higher education … should expose its students to disciplines whose standards are rightly contested and to a form of learning that intensifies or unsettles desires rather than simply aspiring to satisfy them’ (Staddon and Standish 2012, 631). Clearly, this argument is similar to that of the current paper, but Staddon and Standish were discussing the ‘student experience’ in particular, and they did not use the etymology of ‘satisfaction’ to argue against forms of settlement within Higher Education.

Taking on the theme of settlement, Amanda Fulford (2013) has discussed how being preoccupied with student satisfaction can limit the opportunities for real dialogue within academic-student tutorials. Drawing on the work of Henry David Thoreau, Fulford (2013) argues for the potential value of being unsettled as opposed to aiming for student satisfaction, as she contends:

Student satisfaction, in the tutorial context, derives from a conversation (rather than a discussion) which is based on the contentment derived from knowing exactly what is required to gain a pass mark in an assignment, or to achieve a certain degree classification. (Fulford 2013, 116, 117)

Academic tutorials have clearly been subjugated to the rationale of an economic exchange. When students come to a tutorial looking for a specific answer, academics are obliged to provide them with the answer in order to ensure that they are settled down and satisfied (Fulford 2013). This inevitably leads to what Standish (2005, 59) has called a ‘closed economy of exchange’, in which academic-student relationships become merely contractual, and are dominated by a means-ends rhetoric. Whilst acknowledging Fulford’s (2013) work in this area, this discussion of student satisfaction as a form of settlement is strictly limited to considerations of ‘voice’ within Higher Education.

Bringing the work of Heidegger to bear upon contemporary issues within Higher Education, Gibbs (2015) has discussed the notion of ‘satisfaction’ as opposed to ‘contentment’. Discussing Heidegger’s notion of ‘moods’ and temporality, Gibbs has also distinguished the short-term meeting of needs (desire satisfaction), from the more long-term goal of ‘profound happiness’ or contentment (2016, 1). As he describes here:

Profound happiness is contentment in becoming what one wills one’s being to be, in the knowledge of one’s capabilities. The approach involves an educative process of
developing potential capabilities and a realistic appreciation of what this means for one, being in the world with others (Gibbs 2015, 56).

Moreover, Gibbs and Angelides (2004) have discussed how Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world could be cultivated through experiential learning, by allowing students the freedom to explore both their being, and their relations to others in the world. This freedom to explore one’s being-in-the-world could be actively promoted by giving students more space in the curriculum to ‘potter about’, to follow the byways of their curiosity and not to worry about learning outcomes or assessment criteria’ (Gibbs 2016, 8).

There are lines of connection to be drawn here between this paper and the work of Paul Gibbs, but his application of Heidegger’s work to the HE context has been particularly focused on temporality, moods and contentment. The distinction drawn between short-term desire satisfaction and ‘profound happiness’ (Dean and Gibbs 2015, 7) is helpful for the discussion here of settlement, but the ‘contentment’ discussed here will differ from that of Gibbs. Here, contentment will be explicated in its relation to ‘satisfaction’ as a form of settling down. This settlement not only limits the potential of one’s Higher Education, but it also removes the ontological concern with one’s being in favour of obtaining ‘value for money’ (Rolfe 2002, 178) and graduate employability.

While a seemingly unusual and bold move, I will now turn to the work of Martin Heidegger in order to rethink how ‘unsettlement’ within one’s Higher Education could be conceived. Heidegger sought to investigate the question of Being phenomenologically in its relation to ‘time’ as temporality; hence the publishing of Sein und Zeit (Being and Time, hereafter BT) in 1927. There is a significant ‘turn’ in Heidegger’s work from the 1950s onwards, after which his thought was concerned with technology, poetry and architecture. The discussion of Heidegger’s work here will be centred on BT, but I will also explore the notion of the uncanny in relation to his interpretation of Sophocles’ ‘Ode to Man’ from the Antigone play.

This paper adds to the current debate within philosophy of education by looking at the etymology of ‘satisfaction’, and it will draw on Heidegger’s notion of the ‘uncanny’ (das Unheimliche) to argue for the ontological import of being unsettled within HE. In contrast to previous research in the field, this paper will consider unsettlement as part of an ontological concern with one’s being; it will engage with the work of Martin Heidegger to argue for the potentially transformative value of leaving students unsettled in their education, but also in their lives more generally.

I will be discussing Heidegger’s notion of the uncanny, or das Unheimliche, to argue that being unsettled and experiencing disquietude is part of our human condition. As such, seeking to meet student expectations and satisfy them – in terms of settling them down and making everything homely – would not be true to their Being; at best, this could be considered a futile mission, and at worst, disingenuous. The quest for self-knowledge as the struggle to un-conceal one’s Being may involve discomfort, but it is ultimately transformative and worthwhile. With the emphasis placed on satisfying students and settling them down, ontological
concerns may be easily pushed aside, but if the potentially edifying functions of Higher Education are to come to the fore again, then we need to consider the prospective merit of such unsettlement.

**Martin Heidegger’s philosophical project**

Martin Heidegger first introduces his notion of the uncanny, or the *das Unheimliche*, in *Being and Time* (1962). The uncanny is inextricably tied to Heidegger’s project within BT to explicate and pose the question of Being. This investigation of Being is conducted phenomenologically, and Heidegger discusses ‘Being’ itself through the mode of *Dasein*. *Dasein* literally translates as ‘Being-there’; it describes a Being or entity for which the question of Being is relevant (Heidegger 1962, 27). As Heidegger puts it, ‘Dasein is in each case mine’ (1962, 67), and I am that entity for whom there is a question of Being; as such, my own Being is implicated in this question.

The question of Being is complex, open-ended and definitive answers may be hard to find for such a question; this question cannot be approached instrumentally. Engaging with the question of Being could unsettle us and lead to dissatisfaction, rather than satisfaction, when considered as a form of settling down and contentment. In order to be able to consider the question of Being, before being able to actually pose the question, we must start from a place of ‘not-knowing’. If we begin by feeling assured that we know who we are and what our ‘Being’ consists in, then the project of BT would be lost on us. Heidegger demands of his readers an ‘exertion’ in contemplating this problem, and the project of BT is posited as follows: ‘the indefinability of Being does not eliminate the question of its meaning; it demands that we look that question in the face’ (Heidegger 1962, 23).

Although comprehending the question of Being may itself be unsettling, considering one’s own ontological condition may be transformative – and thus, educative – in its own right. In the next section, I will discuss Heidegger’s notion of the uncanny as provoked by both the mood of angst, and the ontological condition of originary angst (as that which is part of our human condition). The uncanny could be considered as the most primordial form of unsettlement – an unsettlement and unhomeliness within one’s Being – but there are benefits to be gained from this experience. As Katherine Withy (2015, 4) puts it, ‘the uncanny experience is not a negative revelation of what everyday life has been like but a positive revelation of what the human essence is like’, and it is this positive value of being unsettled and experiencing the uncanny that I will now draw attention to.

**The *das Unheimliche***

The *das Unheimliche* is integral to our human condition; it is contingent upon the fact that we ourselves are cases of *Dasein* (Heidegger 1962). The ‘un-canny’ is conceived of as a negation of that which is ‘canny’ or homely. ‘Canny’ is a word of
Scottish origin, meaning among other things, a sense of ‘knowing and comfort, coziness’ (Withy 2015, 1). The term ‘uncanny’ was originally coined by Sigmund Freud, in seeking English equivalents to ‘Unheimlich’, he described the uncanny as: ‘uncomfortable, uneasy, gloomy, dismal, uncanny, ghastly; (of a house) haunted; (of a man) a repulsive fellow’ (1919, 2).

Freud (1919) translated Unheimlich as ‘un-homely’, understood as a sense of the unfamiliar within what is familiar, this was explicated through the example of Hoffman’s ‘The Sandman’. Whilst clearly influenced by Freud’s work, Heidegger’s (1962) conception of the uncanny differs from that of Freud in that his conception is much stronger. Rather than the uncanny being a feeling we experience at a particular time, and provoked by a particular situation, Heidegger considers the das Unheimliche to be something more primordial – as something ontological within our human condition.

The ‘uncanniness’ (Unheimlichkeit) of one’s own Being may be revealed through experiencing the mood of angst; in angst there is ‘a revelation of the Dasein in me’ (Withy 2015, 73). In recognising oneself as a case of Dasein, the ‘thrownness’ of one’s Dasein is also disclosed to us. As Withy puts it, ‘thrownness is the ‘that it is’ of Dasein: the fact that it is as it is’ (2015, 72). Thrownness could thus be considered as the conditions of one’s Being, that we are the kind of entities we are, which happens to be cases of Dasein. But in recognising oneself as a case of Dasein which has been ‘thrown’ into the world, the das Unheimliche may be encountered as a result of experiencing the uncertainty of knowledge here, that the very Being which we understood ourselves to be is in fact obscured from view. As Heidegger describes this, ‘that it is factically, may be obscure and hidden as regards the ‘why’ of it; but the ‘that-it-is’ has itself been disclosed to Dasein’ (1962, 321).

In angst, the obscurity of the ‘thrownness’ of one’s Being is revealed; that this raises more questions than answers is perhaps what leads to the realisation of our own inherent uncanniness. At this point, it is important to highlight that the mood of angst is a ‘grounded’ mood. As such, the mood of angst is not experienced in relation to a particular situation or directed towards a particular object, as in contrast to the mood of fear, for example (Withy 2015). As Withy puts it, ‘Being-in-the-world is angst’; through the mood of angst, the question of one’s Being (and the very unintelligibility of this question) is revealed (2015, 80–81).

The das Unheimliche could be considered as ‘the darkness at the end of sense-making’ whereby Dasein, in recognising itself as thrown, reaches the end of its understanding (Withy 2015, 75). The uncanny, as being both at-home and not-at-home in the world concurrently, is experienced when one recognises that their Being is not something self-created, as Withy explains:

I did not choose to be a case of Dasein and in this sense did not create myself. But as a case of Dasein, I make sense of things – including myself – and I do so by discovering things in light of my inherited world … I must start from the fact that I am a case of Dasein and I can never escape, undo, or fully take over this fact. (2015, 74)
Encountering one’s own uncanniness (Unheimlichkeit) can be an unsettling, disconcerting experience. But uncanniness is not something that Being encounters in a particular situation and then moves on from, although experiencing the mood of angst could provoke a sense of uncanniness. Rather, uncanniness is something internal to the state of Being, and thus to the human being itself. As Withy describes this:

There is something inherently wrong with Dasein: a finitude internal to it … Dasein’s finitude is essential to it: in being uncanny it is not failing to be what it is. What Dasein is, in fact, is essentially un-at-home (un-heimlich or un-zuhause) … Dasein’s uncanniness is its essence rather than a blemish on its essence. (2015, 100, 101)

As with the question of Being, the das Unheimliche is not something which can be easily resolved, but nevertheless it needs to be engaged with in order that we may further un-conceal our own Being (Heidegger 1962). An illustrative example of such uncanniness from Sophocles’ Antigone will now be discussed.

**Sophocles’ Antigone**

Heidegger has drawn on several Greek plays to discuss the question of Being, and as he explains here ‘this poetry [of the Greeks] is tragedy – the poetry in which Greek Being and Dasein [a Dasein belonging to Being] were authentically founded’ (2000, 154). In both the *Introduction to Metaphysics* (2000) and *Holderlin’s Hymn ‘The Ister’* (1984/1996), Heidegger discusses Sophocles’ play *Antigone* and the choral ‘Ode to Man’ in particular, as an explication of the uncanny.

The first stationary song from Sophocles’ *Antigone*, the choral ‘Ode to Man’, has been discussed at length by Martin Heidegger as an example of the uncanny (das Unheimliche), with Antigone herself being characterised as ‘the supreme uncanny’ (1984/1996, 104). The choral ode is made up of two strophes, with each having a corresponding antistrophe. For our discussion here, I will present the first six lines of the first strophe⁵:

Manifold is the uncanny, yet nothing
More uncanny looms or stirs beyond the human being.
He ventures forth on the foaming tide
amid the southern storm of winter
and crosses the surge
of the cavernous waves. (Heidegger 1984/1996, 58)

What this part of the choral ode highlights is that the human being is the uncanniest entity of all, and that this uncanniness is manifold or doubly deinon⁶ (δεινόν, Heidegger 1984/1996). This manifoldness represents the fact that one’s Being, as uncanny, is always counterturning back upon itself. The obscurity of the ‘whence’ of thrownness – which describes our uncanny nature – involves a continual movement between self-knowledge and self-loss, whereby one’s Being is in a perpetual cycle between presencing and absencing. This quest for intelligibility (with Dasein as the sense-maker) is analogous to being cast forth on the foaming tide, as the ode puts it. As Withy (2015, 125) explains this:
The human being’s ‘faring forth’ into the sea does not refer to sea travel or fishing but poetically projects the human being’s entry into being’s struggle … The human being breaks away into the overwhelming sea, stretching out beyond itself towards being.

Venturing forth on the foaming tide, as provoked by encountering the uncanny, involves a breaking away from firm ground, ‘it breaks out (auszubrechen) from that-which-is-homely’ (Withy 2015, 125). In recognising the uncanniness within one’s own Being, one then has to leave what is ‘canny’ or homely in pursuit of self-knowledge. This being cast forth on the foaming tide is a very treacherous and difficult journey, both literally and metaphorically, as a concern with one’s soul. One must ride the crest of the waves, without being able to plunge into its depths; just as one’s own Being is only accessible to a certain depth, so the obscurity of the thrownness of Dasein remains.

This obscurity then brings us back to the question of Being itself. In reading BT (Heidegger 1962), one’s self as a case of Dasein is implicated within the question of Being, and there is inevitably a ‘breaking-away’ from firm land (Withy 2015) in trying to even pose this question. In dealing with the question of Being, the most fundamental question that we have, we may indeed feel ‘lost at sea’ with no safe ground in which to (re-)anchor ourselves. Encountering the uncanny (das Unheimliche) within one’s own human condition may be extremely unsettling, it could be provoked by and/or experienced alongside angst, but it may also be utterly transformative. Just because there may not be definitive answers to be found here, does this mean that the question of Being (and other such questions of its ilk) should be neglected?

Possible implications for higher education

In the previous sections of this paper, I have discussed how student satisfaction involves both a form of settling up (as in a financial transaction), and settling down (in terms of meeting student expectations). Through the work of Martin Heidegger I have explored the value of being unsettled and experiencing the ‘uncanny’ within one’s own Being, as the quest for self-knowledge and intelligibility. In the final section of this paper, I will discuss how these ideas relate back to Higher Education, and how they could open up the possibilities for an unsettling education that is ultimately more transformative and edifying.

This research has questioned the current dominance of student satisfaction measures in the contemporary university, and has argued that rather than primarily aiming to meet student expectations, certain forms of educative unsettling may prove more beneficial. Encountering the uncanny (das Unheimliche) within one’s own Being is not directly linked to Higher Education, nor is it something that could be actively provoked by making students experience the mood of angst, or anxiety. Whilst the direct opposite of student satisfaction could be considered as ‘dissatisfaction’, this is not what the paper is arguing for; rather, it seeks to draw attention to the ways in which aiming for satisfaction – and thus, settlement – can
limit Higher Education to the short-term meeting of student expectations. Without wanting to provide a prescriptive ‘curriculum of unsettling’, an illustrative example of experiencing the uncanny within one’s Higher Education will now be presented through a discussion of the novel *Stoner* (Williams 1965/2003).

The 1965 novel *Stoner*, by the American writer John Williams, is a profound illustration of the ‘venturing forth’ and unsettlement that may be involved in one’s Higher Education. The book traces the life of its main character, William Stoner, and tells the story of his life from the point where he begins his Higher Education. Stoner is from a rural farming community, and almost naturally, it seems, goes to the University of Missouri to study agriculture, with the plan of then returning to the farm and taking it over from his parents. Stoner settles readily into Higher Education, finding his studies manageable, if not a little too easy. He feels at home studying soil chemistry, but it is the required course in English literature that ‘troubled and disquieted him in a way nothing had ever done before’ (Williams 1965/2003, 10).

Stoner is clearly unsettled and discomfited by his classes in English literature. When asked by his tutor, Archer Sloane, to explain one of Shakespeare’s sonnets in front of the class, Stoner cannot answer. Despite not knowing the ‘correct’ answers, and being unable to explicate his thoughts, Stoner is seduced by English literature and the unsettling experience this has offered him. Despite entering Higher Education with a particular end-goal in mind, Stoner experiences angst within the English literature classes that he is captivated by, and he allows this experience of angst to guide his career in a particular way. Stoner subsequently changes his major from Agriculture to English literature. Following this, Stoner completes a masters and PhD in English literature, and then remains at the university as a lecturer. In continuing his Higher Education beyond what was expected of him by his family, and in a different trajectory, Stoner not only experiences angst but actively embraces this as part of his education – an education which cannot be valued merely in terms of inputs and outputs.

Whilst Stoner’s education looks to have been settled down after his initial experiences, in embarking upon his own research and teaching the next generation of undergraduates, Stoner is again ‘venturing forth upon foaming tide’ (Heidegger 1984/1996, 58) and allowing himself to start from a point of ‘not-knowing’. As Williams writes, ‘sometimes, immersed in his books, there would come to him the awareness of all that he did not know, of all that he had not read; and the serenity for which he labored was shattered’ (1965/2003, 26). There may be moments of homeliness within the uncanny, clearly Stoner now feels ‘at home’ within English literature, but his quest for self-knowledge is an on-going process which involves breaking away from firm ground into what is unknown (Withy 2015).

To allow ourselves to start from this point of ‘not-knowing’, to be led by something that we cannot fully explicate, is to be engaged in a true inquiry. A true inquiry, whether concerning the question of Being itself or some other prominent concern, must be led by something outside of itself; it could not be guided by
pre-determined questions or a means-ends rationality. As Heidegger puts it, in order to engage with the question of Being, ‘inquiry, as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought’ (1962, 25). Stoner starts out at university with a particular end-goal in mind – to study agriculture, and then return to work on his parents’ farm – but through his initial study of English literature, Stoner allows himself to be led by this experience of angst and the uncanniness (das Unheimliche) within his own Being (Heidegger 1962).

What this example of Stoner (Williams 1965/2003) shows is that experiencing angst and unsettlement – as opposed to settlement and satisfaction – could prove transformative for students within Higher Education. The das Unheimliche is the most primordial form of ‘unsettlement,’ an unsettlement and unhomeliness within one’s very Being (Heidegger 1962). Whilst the uncanny is not something that we could directly provoke within HE, there is the possibility that students could encounter this if left in a state of angst in particular ways. In order to engage with such ontological concerns as the question of Being, it may be that what is needed is a ‘venturing forth upon stormy seas’ (Heidegger 1984/1996), whereas the student satisfaction agenda instead seeks to calm the waters.

If student satisfaction – as both a form of settling up, and down – becomes a central aim of Higher Education, then the danger is that with less room in the curriculum to ‘potter about’ (Gibbs 2016, 8), ontological concerns may be ignored. Taking the question of Being as an example, those questions that may be the most unintelligible and difficult for us to explicate, may in fact prove to be the most fundamental of all questions. We cannot ignore those questions which may create angst in order to stay safely within what-is-homely (Withy 2015), but must engage with our own inherent uncanniness (Unheimlichkeit) in order to un-conceal our Being and gain greater self-knowledge, and surely this is what a Higher Education is all about.

In aiming to satisfy students, settle them down and meet their expectations, we may be further obscuring these ontological concerns from view when in fact what is needed is direct engagement with such uncanniness. As Heidegger (1984/1996, 49) puts it, ‘this coming to be at home in one’s own in itself entails that human beings are initially, and for a long time, and sometimes forever, not at home … Coming to be at home is thus a passage through the foreign’.

**Notes**

1. Student satisfaction surveys may be increasingly seen as a measure of ‘quality’ with the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in the UK, which is set to be implemented in 2018. For a further discussion of this, see Higdon (2016).
3. It was part of Heidegger’s aim in writing Being and Time (1962) to bring ontological concerns to the fore, and to engage with the question of Being which had been ‘doubly
forgotten’. As Heidegger saw it, within the history of philosophy, the question of Being had been both ignored and passed over.

4. For further details, see: Freud (1919).


6. The Greek ‘deinon’ translated into English is ‘suffering’, but Heidegger interprets this as ‘on the one hand, the fearful, but also the powerful, and finally, the inhabitual’ (1984/1996, 67).

7. Jeff Frank has offered an excellent reading of *Stoner*, in which he discusses William Stoner’s change of direction as follows, that ‘he can’t decide but to dedicate his life to study and teaching’ (2017, 236). see: Frank (2017).

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**ORCID**

*Claire Skea* [http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0598-0012](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0598-0012)

**References**


